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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER/GERMAIN

NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR CONCERNED ABOUT HARIRI IN ELECTIONS,  
SAYS SECURITY ON TRACK

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr, in a November 21 meeting with visiting CENTCOM J2 Brigadier General Stephen Fogarty, visiting NEA ELA Officer Director Nicole Shampaine, and the Ambassador, said he would travel to Damascus as soon as border cooperation, missing Lebanese soldiers, and the transfer to Lebanese custody of certain terrorist suspects were placed on an official agenda. Murr said President Sleiman, expecting peace talks with Lebanon, Syria, and Israel by 2010, had discussed with him the Ministry of Foreign Affairs portfolio in the next cabinet in the event that the idea of indirect or direct Lebanese-Israeli talks moved ahead. He noted Sleiman would avoid accepting military equipment "gifts" from Iran during his November 24 visit to Tehran. Murr claimed low expectations for his own upcoming trip to Moscow.

¶2. (C) On extremists in Lebanon, Murr assessed that during the past two weeks, the LAF had finished "90 percent of the job" against extremists in northern Lebanon. Murr also said Sunni leader Saad Hariri's Future Movement followers had been involved in the November 21 violence at an LAF checkpoint in Tripoli. Murr expressed concern about the Syrian-supported al-Saiqa faction in the Beddawi camp, but assessed the Ain el Hilweh Palestinian camp near Sidon would remain calm.

¶3. (C) Regarding election security, Murr was confident the LAF could handle skirmishes on election day. He opined the real test would be the 48 hours after the election, as the results were being announced. Murr expressed strong annoyance at Hariri's lack of election preparation efforts. He called it "unforgivable" if Hariri were to lose in Sunni areas that could be easily won. For the first time, we heard Murr use the term "my bloc" rather than "my father's bloc" in discussing local politics. Murr assesses he and his political allies in the Metn and other Christian areas would be able to win twelve seats in 2009 elections, enough to give the forces aligned with March 14 a new majority if Hariri takes care of the Sunni vote. End Summary.

AGENDA DELAYS SYRIA VISIT

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¶4. (C) Defense Minister Murr, in a November 21 meeting with

visiting CENTCOM J2 Brigadier General Stephen Fogarty, visiting NEA/ELA Office Director Nicole Shampaine, and the Ambassador, said he would travel to Syria to meet his Defense Minister counterpart once an agenda was settled. However, Murr noted the agenda must include issues of border cooperation, missing Lebanese soldiers, and the transfer to the Lebanese Defense Ministry of certain terrorist suspects held in Syrian jails. Murr said he would require the agenda statement to be published in the interest of transparency. He also noted he would travel to Damascus because he deemed cooperation between the two countries as important to his portfolio, particularly on border security. Murr said he would brief UNSCOL Michael Williams on any aspect of UNSCR 1701 or border issues. He suspects a Syrian hand behind the 2005 assassination attempt against him and still refuses to visit Damascus in a personal capacity.

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS?

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¶ 15. (C) On the indirect talks between Syria and Israel, Murr assessed U.S. involvement would benefit Lebanon. Murr opined Syrian President Asad needed peace negotiations with Israel in order to rebuild trust with the United States. He said that President Sleiman, preparing for possible engagement by the new U.S. administration in regional peace efforts, had asked him to consider being Foreign Minister, a position currently occupied by a Shia, Fawzi Salloukh, in the next cabinet. Murr said he had told Sleiman that if peace talks appear likely, and a Shia is placed at the head the Defense Ministry, he would accept the role. Sleiman has requested

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Murr's presence on several of his recent international trips to enable Murr to form contacts with non-defense officials abroad, in preparation, Murr said, for a possible MFA spot. Murr said Sleiman, who has a "cautious" attitude towards Syria, expects talks among Syria, Israel, and Lebanon will be underway by 2010. The Ambassador expressed interest that President Sleiman was planning for the future and with regard to such talks, direct or indirect, with Israel but also noted the value the U.S. places on the Minister of Defense position, where close cooperation between the U.S. and Lebanon mandate a strong and trusted ally.

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR RUSSIA VISIT

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¶ 16. (C) Murr said he will travel on his first official visit to Moscow -- postponed since 2005 because of events in Lebanon -- following a December 12 trip to Bahrain, for the International Institute for Strategic Studies conference and a meeting with SecDef Gates. Murr described Sunni leader Saad Hariri as "a little bit excited" about potentially upgrading Lebanon's Russian-issued military equipment. (Note: Hariri traveled to Moscow in early November and discussed Russian military aid to the LAF. End Note.) Murr said he expected nothing will come of the visit. According to Murr, LAF Commander Jean Kahwaji said that arms from Russia are "the last of his concerns," expressing preference for equipment and upgrades from the U.S. Murr said he understood the sensitivities regarding potential Iranian and Russian military assistance to Lebanon and expressed gratitude and pride in the U.S.-aided improvements to the LAF.

STRONG STANCE AGAINST IRANIAN  
MILITARY AID FOR LAF

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¶ 17. (C) Murr described his close coordination with President Sleiman on how to avoid accepting a "gift" of military aid for the LAF during Sleiman's trip to Iran, which began November 24. Murr told Sleiman to cite the need for consultations with the Minister of Defense and the rest of the cabinet before agreeing to any package of military assistance from Tehran. Regarding larger strategic issues,

Murr recommended Sleiman refuse such aid and to blame the UN; Murr suggested the President express concern about Iran's problems with the UN and fear that Lebanon would inherit these problems through strategic alliances with the country.

¶8. (C) According to Murr, Iranian President Ahmadinejad wanted to issue a joint statement during Sleiman's visit. Murr advised Sleiman to avoid doing so. Murr also said Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Reza Shibani paid him a visit regarding Sleiman's trip to Iran. Murr noted this was the first time he received Shibani, despite Shibani's three previous requests, because of Murr's suspicions that assassinated Hizballah terrorist mastermind Imad Mugniyeh was involved in the 2005 attack against Murr. Murr said that Shibani, probing why Murr was not accompanying Sleiman to Iran, asked if Murr was not interested in "having all the LAF's needs met." Murr, in response, suggested Iran instruct Hizballah to turn over its rockets to the army. Murr reportedly told Shibani that the best way for Iran to help the LAF would be to disarm Hizballah.

FRANCE FULFILLING ITS GAZELLE CONTRACT

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¶9. (C) Regarding November 21 press reports on French equipment for Lebanon's Gazelle helicopters, Murr said that France is equipping eleven Gazelles with rockets and GPS equipment to fulfill a contract agreed upon during the fighting last summer between Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese Armed Forces in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian camp. The UAE donated the helicopters to Lebanon and contracted the French to equip the gazelles but the French, who Murr said were concerned their efforts to fight terrorists in Lebanon would unleash terrorism at home, had not yet completed their side of the agreement. Murr said he had refused to receive the French ambassador since last summer because of France's failure to provide this equipment.

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"90 PERCENT" FINISHED WITH TERRORISTS IN NORTH

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¶10. (C) Worryingly, Murr noted the men involved in the November 21 violence at an LAF checkpoint in Tripoli were members of Saad Hariri's Future Movement. The man killed -- identified in November 22 press reports as Ahmad al-Zohbi -- was the regional Future Movement head and opened fire on the LAF checkpoint, according to Murr. Murr feared that extremists groups were indirectly engaging Future Movement members against the LAF without Hariri's knowledge. Murr, explaining the LAF's strong response during the original checkpoint breach and actions after, said he had instructed LAF Commander Jean Kahwaji to "do his job" against northern extremists. Murr said he planned to talk to Hariri about Future Movement's involvement in the incident.

¶11. (C) Defense Minister Murr expressed satisfaction with recent arrests of suspected terrorist operatives in northern Lebanon, saying the LAF during the past two weeks had finished "90 percent of the job" in the north. Murr assessed that while there were many extremists in the region, few of them are affiliated with Al Qaeda. He found little alarming information in the interrogation reports of recently-arrested suspects and described as a "Spielberg scenario" the claims of an Al Qaeda base in northern Lebanon. Murr said Prime Minister Siniora should work to improve living conditions in the region to combat what Murr sees as the main causes of extremism: extreme poverty, unemployment, and lack of infrastructure.

¶12. (C) Murr said the Syrian-backed al-Saiqa faction in the Beddawi camp is the only group he finds alarming. The group, numbering around 400 people, controls the camp. Murr said he is working with the Palestinian group Fatah to arrest and

interrogate a few members of the group to show Syria that "we know what they're doing."

AIN EL HILWEH "WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER NAHR EL BARID"

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¶13. (C) Murr described the 70,000-person Ain El Hilweh Palestinian camp in Sidon as equally divided among Fatah members, supporters of Syria and Hizballah, and those who will support anyone for a price. Murr argued that because an Al Qaeda base in Ain el Hilweh is not in the interests of the camp refugees, Fatah, Hizballah, or Syria, all sides would work to prevent its establishment. Murr assessed that the camp would stay as it is until a larger regional solution is found. Hizballah and the Syrians can use the camp to target UNIFIL forces and northern Israel while blaming any attack on Palestinian groups, said Murr; they are unlikely to cede such an option without other gains.

¶14. (C) Ain el Hilweh will "never be another Nahr el Barid" because of its direct links to Sidon, he continued. The camp intersects many parts of the city and any problem in Ain el Hilweh would close access to Sidon, prompting quick efforts to calm the situation. Additionally, prominent politicians from Sidon, including Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Prime Minister Siniora, and Minister of Education Bahia Hariri are invested in protecting their city from LAF measures against any disturbances in the camp. Murr said he had warned them he would "erase" the camp in the case of an outbreak of violence. Murr said he received "a 100 phone calls," including from Saad and Bahia Hariri and the Prime Minister, when the LAF started operations against the camp last summer; the situation was quiet within two hours. On the other hand, all politicians supported the fight against extremists in Nahr al-Barid during the same time. Murr also noted the close social and familial links between the Palestinian refugees in Ain el Hilweh and residents of Sidon would keep the situation under control.

WORRIED MORE ABOUT THE DAY  
AFTER ELECTIONS

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¶15. (C) Responding to a question from the Ambassador on security for the upcoming parliamentary elections, Murr said he expected troubles but was taking steps now to prepare the LAF; Murr plans to distribute to the army his program for security on November 24. Murr said violence was likely in northern Lebanon between Sunnis and Alawites and between Sunnis and Shia in small cohabited villages and Beirut. The first two instances would be easier to contain than clashes in Beirut, which would require the LAF to adapt techniques to the urban environment. Murr plans to instruct the LAF to arrest anyone causing trouble -- starting "from now."

¶16. (C) Murr said the LAF will temporarily assume control of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) on election day. (Note: This is an extraordinary measure as electoral rules stipulate the Interior Minister assumes authority of the LAF on election day. End Note.) The ISF will provide security in rooms where ballots are cast and the LAF -- forbidden from being present in voting rooms -- will protect the perimeters. The LAF will allow only one person at a time into the voting place; Murr said Interior Minister Ziad Baroud would extend the voting hours by two hours to account for expected delays. Soldiers will be deployed on all roads on election day to discourage skirmishes.

¶17. (C) Murr claimed overall confidence for security during elections but described the 48 hours following the closing of polling stations as the most dangerous. He said if Hizballah and Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun lose, "there will be big problems." Murr was pleased with his staff, including

LAF Commander Kahwaji's motivation to maintain strict security during elections. He described tough security as the only way to deal with Hizballah and the Shia, who he claimed would not fight the LAF because "they would lose everything."

UNHAPPY WITH "YOUNG BOYS  
PLAYING IN QOREITEM"

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¶18. (C) Noting his family's extensive experience in counting votes and gauging elections, Murr said he and his independent political allies would win twelve seats in the 2009 parliamentary elections in Metn and elsewhere. Murr's bloc would give the majority to the Hariri-led March 14 coalition assuming Hariri wins the Sunni vote, Murr said. He described the Sunni vote as "Saad's to lose" but was strongly critical about Hariri's efforts, or lack thereof, to solidify support. Murr said he was "scared" about Hariri's lack of motivation for elections and expressed frustration that he is fighting a battle in the Christian districts to help the coalition while Hariri may lose an "easy" vote within the Sunni population. Murr said he told Hariri that Murr "could not afford to indirectly lose" because of the Sunni leader. Hariri needed to choose if he wanted to "fly, and play," as it was his right, but Murr argued it was his right to know Hariri's decision.

¶19. (C) Murr asked the Ambassador to put pressure on Hariri and said he plans to ask Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdulaziz Khoja, in their upcoming November 25 meeting, to "tell the little boy to work." Murr stressed that Hariri needs to meet with the other Sunni leaders to prepare for elections; former Prime Minister and Sunni leader Najib Mikati had already complained to Murr about Hariri's unwillingness to meet him. Hariri needed to do more to reach out to both Mikati and fellow Tripoli leader Mohammed Safadi (Minister of Economy and Commerce). Tashnaq representatives have also expressed their annoyance with Hariri to Murr.

COMMENT

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¶20. (C) In a subsequent November 24 conversation with Murr, he told us that he believed President Sleiman would play "a more overt role" with the independents beginning in February. "We have two positions," said Murr, "to win or to win." Significantly, for the first time in a conversation with us, Murr used the term "my bloc" rather than "my father's bloc"

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when discussing Metn politics. End comment.

SISON